

S-E-C-R-E-T

CENTRAL INTELLIGENCE AGENCY  
OFFICE OF NATIONAL ESTIMATES

3 October 1969

MEMORANDUM FOR THE DIRECTOR

SUBJECT: Political Development in South Vietnam: Propositions  
and Perspectives

The proposition is frequently advanced that the Government of Vietnam (GVN) can only compete with the Communists if it makes substantial progress in developing popular participation in the political process. While acknowledging the need for continuing efforts in this direction, the following paragraphs argue that for the foreseeable future such progress is neither likely nor critical.

I. SETTING

1. Despite the increased stability of the GVN during the past few years, the effort to construct a broad political base has achieved no more than partial and preliminary results. On the positive side, the GVN leaders have shown a greater interest in developing a more representative government and have taken a number of small but encouraging moves to manifest this. Elections have

GROUP 1  
Excluded from automatic  
downgrading and  
declassification

S-E-C-R-E-T

S-E-C-R-E-T

been held; several efforts are underway to consolidate the numerous small-based political factions in South Vietnam into more effective groupings; and the political attention given to the rural majority has increased. But these moves are only a beginning; the GVN is far away from any political takeoff point.

2. There are a variety of reasons why greater political progress has not taken place. The demands and strains arising from the war, of course, are a major drag on concerted political action. Also, even under the best of circumstances, South Vietnam possesses poor soil for national political growth. There is no tradition of popular participation in politics. Elitist leadership based on the Confucian tradition is the norm outside of Communist controlled areas; to the extent that political movements exist, they tend for historical reasons to rest on regional or special interest groups. Their leadership is highly personalized, their operational approach depends heavily on covertness and maneuver, and they lack a concept of the national interest transcending their small group interests. As a result, politics are characterized by petty niggling rivalries, suspicions, and self-seeking interests.

- 2 -

S-E-C-R-E-T

S-E-C-R-E-T

3. These weaknesses are endemic and have contributed to yet another liability -- the military's distrust of the civilian political groups and of their will to address, let alone solve, the country's problems. It is not surprising that President Thieu operates most effectively behind the scenes and appears somewhat ill at ease in his public efforts at party and nation building. This probably reflects a lack of conviction that the task of constructing a broad political base deserves highest priority. His prime goal appears to be to fashion an effective and viable government. This goal, for example, was evident in the recent appointment of a new GVN cabinet. Thieu calculates that while civilian politicians can contribute to effective government, it is military support and technical competence which is essential and which must be reflected in the governmental machinery.

## II. PROSPECTS AND CONSEQUENCES

4. As the GVN takes over more and more of the war effort, the military's political role will be enhanced and its control of the administration will probably become more direct and visible. Moreover, for the foreseeable future the military will

- 3 -

S-E-C-R-E-T

S-E-C-R-E-T

remain the only non-Communist group with the assets and the apparatus to operate with reasonable effectiveness on a national basis. At the same time, the role and influence of the US will undergo some change and new strains in US-GVN relations may develop from conflicting pressures on Saigon to exercise greater self-reliance in the war while it remains heavily dependent on continued US support.

5. A greater political role by the military would cause disgruntlement among South Vietnam's political groups. It might even lead some -- the An Quang Buddhists perhaps -- to consider direct confrontation or perhaps the possibility of accommodation with the Communists. A serious civilian-military split, however, would be unlikely. In Vietnam, political ideals usually give way to practical considerations, and most political groups would continue to find the prospect of working with the military more palatable and profitable than unyielding opposition to the GVN or a deal with the Communists.

6. As for the people in the villages, their political horizons are still largely limited to local conditions; their primary concerns are with government actions that directly and immediately affect their security and livelihood. They want

- 4 -

S-E-C-R-E-T

S-E-C-R-E-T

reasonably honest village officials -- elected or appointed -- and a reasonably honest and efficient bureaucracy that will assist them in getting better schools, medical services, fertilizer, seeds, etc. Above all, they want peace and security so that they can market their crops and raise their children. They do not regard a growth in political involvement as an essential step toward these goals.

7. Short of shedding all pretense to legitimacy, and perhaps even then, Saigon is unlikely to yield any significant advantage to the Communists by slighting political development. The "militarist, non-representative" complexion of the GVN has long been a major Communist propaganda line; a little more fuel would not add much to the fire. While the war continues and there is no sign of major progress in Paris, both sides are likely to be more concerned with military performance and instruments of political control than with popular image. A relatively smooth process of Vietnamization might even enhance the appeal of a military-oriented government in South Vietnam. Should there be a cease-fire and the prospect of a political settlement, some added weight might be given to the GVN's image and to the loyalties of important political and religious groups. On balance, however,

- 5 -

S-E-C-R-E-T

S-E-C-R-E-T

even a shift of the struggle primarily to the political arena would probably tend to solidify both Saigon's and the Communists' reliance on tested instruments of control and organization: their armed forces and administrative assets.

8. In the event of a more overt military cast to the GVN, the Communists probably would expect their principal benefits to accrue from the reaction of US critics of the war. They would expect such groups to increase pressure on Washington to abandon the GVN. In addition, they would probably attempt to stir up increased suspicion in Saigon of US intentions. The surfacing of a less rigid line in the talks at some future point might serve both these objectives.

9. As noted above, however, experience has given the military some appreciation of the usefulness of a facade of representative government, and they are unlikely to go too far in dismantling it. For example, the constitutional framework almost certainly will be maintained unless the military believes that it imperils national survival. The military will be concerned primarily with establishing an effective government, but they also will probably continue their efforts to build a base of popular political support. To this end, they will continue to make use of

- 6 -

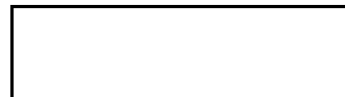
S-E-C-R-E-T

S-E-C-R-E-T

the various political groups in South Vietnam, thereby keeping these elements involved to some extent in the governmental process. Finally, they are aware that continued US support rests in part on there being sensitivity in Saigon to the popular aspirations that do exist and some semblance of forward political motion. They will continue to try to be responsive to advice along such lines, though the results may fall short of what some might consider necessary.

10. In sum then, as Vietnamization of the war occurs, the Vietnamese will begin to do things more their own way. This will probably mean a more direct reliance on the military in governing the country, greater emphasis on a tightly-run government and less emphasis on political parties and popular participation in the political process. This might occasion a marked rise in the chorus of opposition in the US to American involvement in Vietnam. Within South Vietnam, however, the potential adverse effects would be tempered considerably by the military leaders having learned the usefulness of maintaining a facade of civilian participation. Moreover, most of the population will continue to be more immediately concerned with effective, honest government than with being directly represented in the governing process.

FOR THE BOARD OF NATIONAL ESTIMATES:



ABBOT SMITH  
Chairman

25X1

MEMORANDUM FOR: The Director

I think this is an excellent memo.  
But some of it at least is not what everyone  
wants to hear; accordingly it is addressed  
to you and won't be sent out unless you  
wish. I recommend modest distribution.

OCI people joined in the Board meeting,  
and agree with it.

Copies to:

DDCI  
DDI  
D/OCI  
EAVA  
DDP

ABBOT SMITH  
Director  
National Estimates

3 October 1969  
(DATE)

FORM NO. 101 REPLACES FORM 10-101  
1 AUG 54 WHICH MAY BE USED.

(47)